

# The Story of Bruce Lilley 1928 - 2014

## Part 3

Bruce and Merrill Lilley

### CHAPTER FOUR

## The Post War Years

Before Christmas I was off again, on the Churruga out of London. We left on 5th December, 1946 and I stayed with the ship until 6th July 1947. In this time we made a number of short trips, returning to London after each one, which suited me very well as I could pop home and visit my mother. All these trips were to Mediterranean ports. We went to Palma in Majorca several times to pick up cargoes of food, including potatoes, oranges, onions, grapes and walnuts. The grapes were always shipped in little barrels, lined with sawdust. The oranges were packed in boxes and other produce in bags. On each visit we were in port for a couple of days only. Majorca in 1946 and 1947 was very poor, the economy having suffered through the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War. Whenever we were alongside in Palma we were besieged by people (probably gypsies, I think) carrying small tins and begging for any scraps from the galley. There was little for us to do ashore. The city had nothing to offer in the way of food or entertainment. The same was true in other Spanish ports in the post-war period. I remember going ashore from the Churruga in Valencia and going into a café where a small orchestra was playing. As we sat there with our cervercas I noticed that the musicians were attired, (valiantly) in evening dress, no doubt unearthed from pre-war storage. The elbows and knees of their



suits were shiny with age and use, but they played with as much aplomb as if they were in a concert hall. The Churruga was a coal-burning ship and when it was in port at night the boilers were shut down and the crew had to manage with oil lamps. Once, when we were berthed in London and I had gone to my mother's flat for the night I returned to the ship the following morning and, not seeing the cook about, I went to his cabin to call him. He had failed to adjust the wick of his oil lamp correctly and he and his cabin were covered in Black soot.

It was while I was serving on the Churruga

that I was promoted, on 12th March, 1947, to the position of Assistant Cook, which meant a rise in salary and status. It also meant more responsibility and more actual cooking! The heat for cooking was all from coal, of course, for ovens and hot plates. The pots and pans were all made of heavy iron. The crew had three meals a day, with two sittings at each meal. Breakfast was at 8am or 9am, dinner at 12 noon and 1pm and tea or supper at 6pm, or 8pm for the last watch, who got the 'Black pan'. All meals were substantial - they needed to be. At breakfast there would be porridge and a fry-up of whatever was available, eggs, bacon, sausages and tomatoes. Dinner, the main meal was always a roast, with whatever vegetables were available. On short trips like those we made to the Med. fresh vegetables were always in season. On long trips like those I made on the Coombe Hill, we would run out of fresh and have to use dried peas and beans. The number of crew obviously depended on the size of the ship and might vary from 30 to 80 men. I should mention that the conditions in the galley and the quality of the food varied greatly from ship to ship, depending on the shipping company which ran the line and, thereafter, on the amount allocated for stores and how this was used. The chief steward on a ship ordered all the supplies and he and the cook worked out the menus. As assistant cook I had no say in any of this and did as the cook directed.

Mostly I liked what I did and developed my own way of cooking certain dishes. After a time I became good at bread-making, which was, at the time, all done by hand and I was delighted when my loaves were praised by the crew members. Often a large passenger ship might have about ten assistant cooks and we all shared the cramped quarters, each man having his own locker, so there was little privacy. But we had our own, 'glory hole', steward who brought us tea in the morning and again when we were off in the

afternoon. In the evening after work we would go in the crew's 'Pig and Whistle,' for a drink and entertainment by any of the crew members who liked to put on shows for us.

On my next ship, the Roxburgh Castle, I was taken on as Assistant Cook and Baker. But that trip lasted only six or seven weeks. Then I went to a ship called the Rhone, where I am listed as Cook, but this lasted only four weeks. My job as Assistant Cook lasted for the rest of the 1940s. There were many short trips in these years and it is difficult to remember each one in detail. I rarely went back to a ship once I had signed off. I was on the Eros for three voyages, from November 1947 to March 1948, sailing to the West Indies, then on the Fort Ellice for six months. The assignment on the Fort Ellice was an unusual one. To begin with I went with some other seamen out from Southampton as a passenger on the SS America to New York. On the SS America we were treated as passengers and waited on. We all assembled in the Board of Trade office in Ensign. We had to fill in forms to say we would not try to overthrow the US government or engage in any un-American activities. There was a complete crew of about 48, a motley collection of all nationalities and temperaments. For this rough old crew old crew to be waited on was a new experience. It took six days to get to New York and the whole idea of being treated as passengers was so unreal. Some of the men had no pyjamas or dressing gowns and slept in their underwear. When we got to New York we were sent by coach to Baltimore where we were to board the Fort Ellice to take her to India. The Fort Ellice was a Canadian-built fort ship, constructed during the war as a Lease/Lend ship. After the war she was handed back to the Americans and then bought by the Great Eastern Steamship Company. Our job was to deliver her to India, picking up cargoes on the way. Our first cargo was coal which we

loaded at Newport and took to Italy. From there we proceeded to Aden, where we loaded salt to take to Calcutta. This was one of my most difficult trips. The crew consisted of this rough collection of men from various nationalities and the cook had a severe drinking problem. By the time we got to Aden he went mad and had to be put ashore suffering from DTs, leaving me in charge of the galley for the rest of the voyage. I was glad to get to Bombay. Once the ship was safely delivered we had to wait for the company to arrange our passage home. We lived in a seaman's mission in Bombay for a couple of weeks. There were cages for rats under each bed. Finally we were flown back to England in a DC6, a flight which took three days.

In 1948/49 I was on three different ships which took £10 immigrants to Australia or New Zealand. In each case the voyage took about six weeks out and the same back so we were away for four months each time. These were large ships which took about one thousand immigrants. Many of them were ex-servicemen and their families, seizing the opportunity to start a new life and answering the call for new settlers in these two countries which had lost so many men in the Second World War. The ships had their usual crew but, in addition, engaged catering staff to feed the immigrants. I was an assistant cook in the latter category and found it an enjoyable posting, for each time, when the immigrants had been landed in their various destinations our team had no work to do on the voyage home apart from providing our own meals. The regular galley crew were quite separate and we had our own galley. It was like being on a cruise, lazing on the deck and reading much of the time.

In those post-war years ships calling at



*Atlantis*

Australia and New Zealand often returned home short of crew members who had 'jumped ship' and stayed behind. After so many months had elapsed if a man kept out of trouble and found a job he could apply to stay in the country. These deserters could find work in the sugar fields, on the sheep stations, in the bush or at the docks. The countries were so short of workmen. Some got work in the lead mine at Mount Isa, a job which was dangerous but well paid. Another option was travelling around in the bush shooting rabbits and earning so much for each. In the Northern Territory jobs could be had cutting sugar cane, which was cut with machetes and then the stubble was burned off. These workers lived in tents and all their food was supplied. They had no pay until the end of the season with an amount deducted for any tabs they had run up during that time. As time went on the British shipping companies, alarmed at the number of men they were losing in this way, asked the Australian government to stop allowing the these deserters to stay in the country. Ashore, seamen could always find jobs to do in or out of the docks. Mostly these were hard jobs in rough conditions. At four o'clock, it seemed, all work stopped and the workforce repaired to the nearest pub for the 'six o'clock swill', which meant they drank non-stop from four 'til six o'clock when the pubs closed, by which time the sawdust-covered floors were awash with beer. This



*Ormonde*

was hardly surprising as the ale was dispensed by pumps! The pubs were very noisy places with the radio blaring non-stop the whole time they were open. When the Atlantis was berthed in Wellington in New Zealand 56 of the crew 'jumped ship' and disappeared into the mountains. We sailed without them. When the ship left a crowd of Maoris came to the dock and sang 'Now is the Hour, for me to say Goodbye'. Apparently they always did this and never failed to raise a tear.

On 5th April 1949 I was aboard the Ormonde, with another load of immigrants for Australia, stopping at Freemantle, Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney. Then by September I was on the Esperance Bay, this time with 500 immigrants and some general cargo for London, including wool and beef. We got back to London on 19th January, 1950

These trips made a lasting impression on me and gave me a view of a totally different view of the Antipodes. I must admit I was tempted to join the 'deserters' but family ties led me back to England.

Between two assignments to Australia I had a very different posting, which was a complete contrast to my previous ones and another experience I will never forget. In July 1949 I was sent to join the Sammaria. At

this time it was the largest Sam boat in the world. I remember the trip quite clearly because our assignment was to take a ship load of people from Bremerhaven in Europe to Canada. They were all refugees and displaced persons leaving Europe hoping to start a new life in the New World. Many of them were confused and apprehensive. Some had very few possessions and one of the saddest things I witnessed was the time

there was an accident as the ship was loaded. A crane was hoisting the luggage on board when a hook slipped and several bundles of possessions fell into the sea and were not recovered. Those who lost their bundles saw all their worldly goods disappear in a moment. Our passengers seemed to look forward to every meal we served them. Each morning I stood behind a huge pot as they filed past me to receive a large scoop of porridge. It was a terrible journey. All the assistant cooks were berthed right in the stern of the ship which was cold and damp with a lot of vibration from the ship's propeller. After a while we complained and were given an extra blanket each which did not help much.

